☙ Chapter 3 ❧

Sylvio: Octavian

No being, no matter how vile, should have had to endure the agony I was in. I lay at the top of the mountain, curled up on the hard rock, and felt the sun sear my skin once more. It was the third sunrise. My skin was black as char and cracked like burnt logs lying in a fire. My thirst tormented me, although I doubted I'd be able to swallow anything. I had screamed so loud and long that I could no longer do more than whisper a whimper.

In my weakened state, I was unable to call any creatures to give me blood. Besides that, the only living things near were birds and bats. If there were any other animals, they did not come near me. Not even insects would approach my body.

Was this to be my penance? To lie on this clifftop unable to die, endlessly burning day after day?

I lay there and baked in the sun for yet another day. Every moment was torture.

When the moon held sway over the sky, it was bitterly cold, but I was not in as much pain. I could form coherent thoughts. My mind seemed disconnected from the now.

Random memories struck me. They were not pleasant contemplations. I thought of how many hapless victims had burned alive in my wanton rage after Cyneric's murder. I knew now exactly what it had felt like for them. Only for them, death was a surcease from the agony. For me, it was a reminder that my body was already a corpse, animated by a being that reveled in causing anguish for those it owned and so kept me in this life rather than allowing my soul to move on.

I began to think of my mortal life, of the evil I had done even as a boy. The petty torments I contrived for Aleric simply because he was obnoxious. Or forcing myself on Aemilia because I was angry at her for toying with me. As a young man, I'd thought mainly of pleasing myself. Not once did I consider what I could do to help others. And when I thought of my life as a monster, a bringer of death, I wondered what purpose there was in continuing to fight the demonic curse that animated my body. What was the point?

I did not make any pleas to God. I had heard many versions of the same theme from my victims when they realized I'd come to mete out justice for their crimes. I didn't always capture their minds so they would know only pleasure in their final moments. Some deserved to experience the horror their victims felt right before they died. Their pleas to whatever god or gods they worshipped always sounded hollow to me in those moments, and none possessed souls worthy enough to cause me any pain when they prayed.

I was not superior to them. I knew quite well what I deserved.

On the fifth day, it rained. Not a gentle sprinkle, it came down in torrents as it does in deserts. Every drop was another level of agony as the water beat down on my open wounds. I heard it cascade over the cliffside and crash through the canyons, carrying away anything in its path.

There was enough water washing over the rough stones that my body was pushed to the very edge of the cliff, where I struck a brow of rock at the lip and stayed there like a log thrown against the shore. The water rolled me over onto my side so that I gazed out into nothing but the horizon filled with red sand and bare rock. It was hundreds of feet down to the rolling red hills below.

After the rain, the buzzards took an interest in me. They would circle and some even landed, but they did not come near. I tried to call to them so they would bring me blood. When I did, they would squawk and fly away. I could sense how weak my call was.

Consciousness crept over me as the sun rose on the seventh day and a pure white light seared my soul. It came from behind my back and caused my body to cast a long shadow across the valley

far below. I had felt that particular pain once before and knew I was not alone. Even if I were strong enough to turn over, I could sense I would not be able to look upon my visitor; I hadn't been able to the time before.

The being's aura of benevolence was too pure and bright. The light penetrating my dark soul was nearly as unbearable as the sun. I was lost in that agony for a time. I cannot gauge how long—perhaps seconds, or maybe hours.

"We almost lost you," the angel said without introduction. "The demon nearly won."

It was a female voice this time; it was not the same one I'd met before.

"Always remember, Octavian," she continued. "There is only one demon that owns your kind, and there are many of us. Death has not come for you because we did not wish it. Do not let hate, even of what you are, rule your heart. Cling to the part of you that was once human. It will set your feet on the right path."

I could not reply. It wasn't possible for me to form words. Words weren't necessary, in any case. She knew I understood.

I'm not sure when she left. It seemed I fell asleep because it was late afternoon when I became conscious again. I closed my eyes to shield them from the bright rays. It was some time before my brain began to function and add things up. The sun's rays burned away my eyelids on the first day. Without their protection, sight was intermittent, and I'd wondered why my vision wasn't gone entirely. The sun should have eaten my eyes away as it had my lids. I shouldn't have been *able* to blink, nor should I have been able to see.

My arm was stretched out under my cheek. It stuck out of the cliff face and into thin air like the leafless branches of trees that dare live on the edge of a precipice. Slowly, I came to realize that the skin on my hand was no longer blackened and cracked. There was brown leather covering the skeletal fingers. It was smooth, unblemished, and darker than many mulattos I had met. Experimentally, I moved each finger.

They obeyed my command, and there was no pain from the movement. I assessed the rest of my body and was astonished to discover I was uncomfortable and incredibly weak but not in any great pain.

My other arm was wedged against the lip of rock, but I was able to bring my hand across to touch my face. Smooth skin met my fingers. It was sensitive to the touch—new skin. I pushed against the rock so that I rolled enough to lie on my back.

A soft white cloud was slowly drifting across the beautiful expanse of blue. If it had been possible, I would have wept. As it was, no tears came, but I did feel my lips curl into a smile.

Now that pain was not encompassing my every thought, I began to grow hungry. I did not have the strength to stand or even get to my knees. I found I was stuck there, watching the sky fade. Near nightfall, I heard the bats begin to flit out of their cave. I called to them, and they responded. Most bats are tiny creatures. There is not very much blood inside of them. By the time I was able to sit up, they were piled around me. A mound of lifeless husks.

I looked down at them and saw a glint of silver under the mound. I reached down through the pile of bats, scattering them like autumn leaves, and pulled Muerte out of the mound. The leather encasing the blade was cracked and burned, but the sword was not harmed.

My call grew stronger as the sky became full of stars. Lizards and snakes found their way to me until, when the moon began to rise, I was standing on the edge of the cliff looking down at a dark ribbon where water flowed, and trees lined the base of the red hills and cliffs.

Far down the valley, down in that dark ribbon where green things grew, was a flickering light. Humans were traveling through the pass. I thought of the blood that would soon trickle down my parched throat, and of the lives the people down there would share with me. Humans do not travel that desert alone. There would be many to feast on.

For the first time since Cyneric's death, I did not fear the part of me that is vampire. I was not at odds with my body. There was no doubt that I would be able to control my lust for blood. I knew the limits of the demon's hold on me.

I began my descent down the cliff face.

I was still weak, so it was with great care that I chose every purchase on that long climb down the cliff. As I picked my way, more images of my mortal life came to me. Things I thought were forgotten until the angel spoke my given name. Octavian was such a foreign sound. It was not my name anymore. That thought made me pause to consider. Always before on those rare occasions when I would think of my mortal life, I felt a bitter loss. I grieved for what might have been. I felt robbed of the chance to marry, have children, grow old.

As Octavian, would I have continued my narcissistic pursuit of pleasure and adventure even into old age?

After the defeat of our tribe in that last battle, my father was accorded a life of leisure during his exile. I would have received the same treatment. Would I ever have learned how transitory such indulgences are?

The value of objects, even of gold, does not compare to that of a human soul. I knew intimately the value of a soul. That is why my kind are the ultimate thieves. A soul must have a mortal body to progress along their journey. Until they become pure enough to be beyond such an existence. It is freeing a soul that provides a vampire the most pleasure, and so is the main reason we kill. The purer that soul, the more rapture it provides.

Near the bottom of the cliff, the warm night breeze drifted along the sand and washed up the sides of the rock. It brought the pungent scent of camels and the sweet iron smell of human blood. I closed my eyes and breathed it in.

“Come, Sylvio,” I told myself, finally accepting the name given to me by my creator. It is who I am. Octavian Zvanvant was no more. “The night is young. Time for hunting.” I wrapped myself in a concealment charm and dropped the last few feet to the soft sand.